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SUBJECT: A CHAT WITH FORMER PRESIDENT ZEDILLO

Classified By: POLITICAL MINISTER-COUNSELOR CHARLES V. BARCLAY,
REASONS: 1.5(B)

11. (C) Summary: During a January 4 visit to the embassy to renew his visa, former President Ernesto Zedillo cheerfully shared his views on Mexico's post-electoral crisis, Felipe Calderon's debut as President, and the future of his own Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). He seemed unworried about Mexico's stability in the wake of the prolonged post-electoral crisis, bullish about Calderon's presidency, and cautiously optimistic that the PRI would ultimately remake itself and survive its current travails. Judging from his cheerful, relaxed demeanor, he appeared to be greatly enjoying life outside the presidential spotlight. End summary.

AMLO Caused Himself Great Political Damage

12. (C) A cheerful, reflective Ernesto Zedillo told MCPA and Deputy MCPA that he had been far less concerned about Mexico's post-electoral crisis than most Mexico-watchers. He said he never had doubted the integrity of the vote totals reported by the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) and confirmed by the Federal Electoral Tribunal (TRIFE), and throughout had had confidence that once the TRIFE rendered its final judgment, the post-electoral protests would wane. He said that while he was not surprised that losing PRD candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) had protested the unfavorable results, he was surprised by the radicalness (and duration) of his tactics. He believes that ultimately, the protests had done AMLO and his party untold political damage: while AMLO may have succeeded in firing the ardor of the 15-20 percent of voters who supported him unreservedly, he had lost many of the center and center-left voters that nearly had given him victory. He lamented the blind support accorded AMLO by most members of the PRD, noting that while the party had some capable, responsible members, it undoubtedly had suffered considerable damage by its radical turn. When asked about AMLO's political future, Zedillo said he doubted AMLO had a future in institutional politics, but that he would certainly do his best to be a thorn in Calderon's side throughout his sexenio, mobilizing popular opposition whenever Calderon sought to implement much-needed reforms.

Bullish on Calderon

13. (C) Zedillo was optimistic about the prospects for Calderon's presidency. He characterized Calderon as highly

intelligent, serious and politically experienced. He recalled that during his own administration, he had worked closely with Calderon, then a PAN leader. He jokingly noted that while Calderon occasionally had been "a pain in the neck," that was the purpose of an opposition leader and that Calderon had proven himself politically savvy.

The PRI Is Not Finished...Yet

¶4. (C) Zedillo believed that his own Institutional Revolutionary Party was not inevitably destined to fade away, that as Mexico's only centrist party, it filled a necessary void in the Mexican political spectrum. He said the party needed a complete makeover -- much along the lines of the British Labor Party prior to Tony Blair's leadership -- although he seemed unable to name a Blair-like leader in the PRI capable of transforming the party. He concurred that the party had not yet learned the lesson of its electoral defeats. He argued that to transform itself, the party had to rid itself of party "dinosaurs," a difficult task since many of the dinosaurs were still in their political prime.

Life After Los Pinos

¶5. (C) Zedillo expressed his satisfaction with his life after Los Pinos, noting that in addition to his academic duties at Yale, he sat on several corporate boards, worked with a number of non-profit organizations, and was helping to author a high-level UN-sponsored study on global poverty. He recalled that during his presidency he had promised to completely leave the world of politics at the end of his term, and he was proud of having kept that promise, something which he believed all former presidents should do. Indeed, he confessed that he maintained little contact with the world of Mexican politics -- following it only superficially by internet -- and did not even know many current PRI governors. He and his wife live in Hamden, CT.

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